

Kim Edwards Biography

Source: *litlovers.com*



Kim Edwards is the author of the short story collection *The Secrets of a Fire King*, which was an alternate for the 1998 PEN/Hemingway Award, and she has won both the Whiting Award and the Nelson Algren Award. A graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, she currently teaches writing at the University of Kentucky.

In the late '90s, Edwards was making a major splash on the literary scene. Her recently published short story collection would soon be pegged for a Whiting Award and the Nelson Algren Award, and would also be an alternate for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Around this charmed time, Edwards heard a story that would ultimately propel her toward a career as a bestselling novelist.

"A few months after my story collection, *The Secrets of a Fire King*, was published, one of the pastors of the Presbyterian church I'd recently joined said she had a story to give me," she explained in an interview on the Penguin Group USA web site. "It was just a few sentences, about a man who'd discovered late in life that his brother had been born with Down syndrome, placed in an institution at birth, and kept a secret from his family, even from his own mother, all his life. He'd died in that institution, unknown. I remember being struck by the story even as she told it, and thinking right away that it really would make a good novel. It was the secret at the center of the family that intrigued me. Still, in the very next heartbeat, I thought: Of course, I'll never write that book."

Despite Edwards's quick dismissal of the idea, it would not unhand her. She let several years slip by without going to work on the story, but she never forgot it. When she was invited to run a writing workshop for mentally disabled adults, the experience affected Edwards so profoundly that she started mulling over the pastor's story more seriously. It would be another year before Edwards actually began working on *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, but once she did, she found that it came quickly and surprisingly well-developed.

Book Summary

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On a winter night in 1964, Dr. David Henry is forced by a blizzard to deliver his own twins. His son, born first, is perfectly healthy. Yet when his daughter is born, he sees immediately that she has Down's Syndrome. Rationalizing it as a need to protect Norah, his wife, he makes a split-second decision that will alter all of their lives forever. He asks his nurse to take the baby away to an institution and never to reveal the secret.

But Caroline, the nurse, cannot leave the infant. Instead, she disappears into another city to raise the child herself. So begins this beautifully told story that unfolds over a quarter of a century in which these two families, ignorant of each other, are yet bound by the fateful decision made that long-ago winter night.

A brilliantly crafted, stunning debut, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* explores the way life takes unexpected turns, and how the mysterious ties that hold a family together help us survive the heartache that occurs when long-buried secrets burst into the open. (From the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

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1. When David hands his baby girl over to Caroline and tells Norah that she has died, what was your immediate emotional reaction? At this early point, did you understand David's motivations? Did your understanding grow as the novel progressed?
2. David describes feeling like "an aberration" within his own family (p. 7) and describes himself as feeling like "an imposter" in his professional life as a doctor (p. 8). Discuss David's psyche, his history, and what led him to make that fateful decision on the night of his children's birth.
3. When David instructs Caroline to take Phoebe to the institution, Caroline could have flatly refused or she could have gone to the authorities. Why doesn't she? Was she right to do what she did and raise Phoebe as her own? Was Caroline morally obligated to tell Norah the truth right from the beginning? Or was her moral obligation simply to take care of Phoebe at whatever cost? Why does she come to Norah after David's death?

4. Though David wanted no part of her, Phoebe goes on to lead a full life, bringing much joy to Caroline and Al. Her story calls into question how we determine what kind of life is worth living. How would you define such a life? In contrast to Phoebe's, how would you describe the quality of Paul's life as he grew up?

5. Throughout the novel, the characters often describe themselves as feeling as if they are watching their own lives from the outside. For instance, David describes the moment when his wife is going into labor and says "he felt strangely as if he himself were suspended in the room...watching them both from above" (p. 10). What do you think Edwards is trying to convey here? Have you ever experienced similar feelings in your own life?

6. There is an obvious connection between David and Caroline, most aptly captured by a particular moment described through David's point of view: "Their eyes met, and it seemed to the doctor that he knew her—that they knew each other—in some profound and certain way" (p. 12). What is the significance of this moment for each of them? How would you describe the connection between them? Why do you think David married Norah and not Caroline?

7. After Norah has successfully destroyed the wasps' nest, Edwards writes that there was something happening in Norah's life, "an explosion, some way in which life could never be the same" (p. 139). What does she mean, and what is the significance of Norah's "fight" with these wasps?

8. When David meets Rosemary (p. 267) it turns out to be a cathartic experience for him. What is it about her that enables David to finally speak the truth? Why does he feel compelled to take care of her?

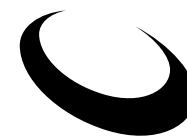
9. The secret that David keeps is enormous and ultimately terribly destructive to himself and his family. Can you imagine a circumstance when it might be the right choice to shield those closest to you from the truth?

10. What do you think Norah's reaction would have been if David had been honest with her from the beginning? How might Norah have responded to the news that she had a daughter with Down syndrome? How might each of their lives have been different if David had not handed Phoebe to Caroline that fateful day?



Book Club in a Bag

Memory Keeper's Daughter by Kim Edwards



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The Things They Carried

Contents and Sign-out Sheet

Kits include one bag, 10 books, and a pocket folder of materials.
Use this sign-out sheet to keep track of who takes which copy of the book. Groups may keep the folder when returning the books and bag.

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Due Date:



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